



*La Plata County*  
Colorado



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For additional information:

Please contact the Joint Information Center at 970-812-3351

August 14, 2015  
12:00 p.m.

# **Update on Local Response to Gold King Mine and Animas River Impacts - Sheriff Smith Opens Recreation on the River in La Plata County**

Durango, CO – The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has collected and analyzed sediment from the Animas River. The data show levels of contamination are below what would be a concern for human health during typical recreational exposure.

Based on this statement from the state health department, Sheriff Sean Smith has made the decision to open the river to recreational use with the attached health advisory from the state health department. Sheriff Smith said, “My primary concern is the public health and safety of our community. In an abundance of caution, with the consultation of all our partner agencies, I issued the order to close the river to recreational uses on Thursday, August 6. With the release of preliminary results from the state health department and its accompanying recommendation, I am opening our river for recreation effective Friday, August 14, 2015 at noon with the health advisory.”

Sediment is just one indicator of a healthy river, and there is some level of contamination in most Colorado rivers because of past mining activities and the geology of the state. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment does not anticipate adverse health effects from exposure to contaminants detected in the water and sediment during typical recreational activities. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry recommends the following recommendations are prudent public health practices regarding contact with sediments and surface water:

1. Don't drink untreated water from the river
2. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after contact with the sediment and surface water.
3. Avoid contact in areas where there is visible discoloration in sediment or river water.
4. Wash clothes after contact with sediments and surface water.

In addition, the EPA sediment samples collected in the Animas River from Baker's Bridge to north of Durango have been analyzed but not yet validated. EPA has done a preliminary review of the data which included a comparison to background to determine if the metal concentrations are consistent with pre-

incident levels. Metal results that exceeded pre-incident levels were subsequently compared to risk-based screening levels. These preliminary results indicate that minor exceedances of background concentrations were observed for antimony, lead, silver, thallium. However, comparison to risk-based screening values found these exceedances to be below risk screening levels.

The review and interpretation of these data was a collaborative effort that included state and local members of the unified command. Once EPA sediment data is validated, it will be posted online at:  
<http://www2.epa.gov/goldkingmine>

While conditions in the Animas River today have been determined safe for recreational use, irrigation ditches that draw from the river currently are being flushed, and agricultural users should continue to exercise patience until this process is complete.

La Plata County has flushed and allowed use of some irrigation ditches for watering crops such as wheat and alfalfa. The county is systematically working to reopen all ditches. Operators of ditches that use water from the Animas River are asked to call the La Plata County Call Center at 970-385-8700 so officials can coordinate reopening of all river head gates. Flushing may cause local, temporary discoloration of the Animas River, which should clear quickly.

Gardeners who use water from the Animas River and grow leafy vegetables and root crops should call the CSU Extension office at 970-382-6463. Answers to questions are site and crop specific.

The Colorado Department of Agriculture State Veterinarian's Office is confident that water from the Animas River can be used to water livestock. "The information we have received shows that water quality levels are comparable to those prior to the spill," said Dr. Carl Heckendorf, State Veterinarian for the Colorado Department of Agriculture. "We will continue to monitor the situation and will provide updates if it becomes necessary."

Local, tribal, state and federal agencies will continue to test water and sediment routinely and will respond quickly to any potential issues.

Incident information is posted to the La Plata County website at <http://www.co.laplata.co.us/emergency>, San Juan Basin Health Department's Website at [www.sjbhd.org](http://www.sjbhd.org), on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/LaPlataCounty](http://www.facebook.com/LaPlataCounty), and <http://www.facebook.com/sanjuanbasinhealth>. Data is posted to Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment website at <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/animas-river-spill>, at EPA's website at <http://www2.epa.gov/goldkingmine>. La Plata County has set up a call center for questions from citizens at 970-385-8700, open from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Southern Ute Tribal members may call the Tribal Hotline at 970-563-5025.

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